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The sequential patterning of tactics Activism in the global sports apparel industry, 1988-2002

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – Activist groups apply a range of tactics in order to improve labour conditions in the global sports and apparel industry. The accumulation of these tactics leads to the build-up of pressure on firms within this industry (brands, retailers) to change their policies and activities on labour issues in their supply chains. The purpose of this paper is to explore how activist groups instigate change within an industry.

Design/methodology/approach – By re-examining a series of previously published accounts, eight conflict situations in the global sports and apparel industry, involving Nike, Reebok and Adidas, were analysed.

Findings – The paper demonstrates how an industry-level approach is helpful in understanding how the sequential patterning of tactical choices evokes change in an industry. Studying activist groups' tactics from this approach provides a richer understanding.

Originality/value – The paper contributes to the growing literature on activists' influence strategies in conflicts with firms and speaks to current attempts at bringing together social movement and organization theories.

Keywords: Conflict, Industrial relations, Garment industry, Supply chain anagement

Paper type: **Research paper**

1 INTRODUCTION¹

Activist groups have become important stakeholders to business organizations. By making all sorts of claims on what firms should or should not do, and leveraging these through a variety of tactics, they seek to influence corporate policies and practices on issues relating to what they believe are the social or environmental responsibilities of firms. Often they do so without recourse to the law or state (“private politics”, Baron, 2003). Scholarly attention to the relationships between activist groups and firms concerning social and environmental issues has gained considerable interest in the organization, management, and social movement literatures (Rowley and Moldoveanu, 2003; Smith, 2005; den Hond and de Bakker, 2007; Soule, 2009). The reason for such increased interest is not only empirical. The challenge is to understand how activist groups, which are commonly viewed as being endowed with less power than their corporate opponents, are nevertheless sometimes able to affect considerable changes in corporate practices (de Bakker and den Hond, 2008). Although the activist groups’ repertoires of tactics have been explored in the corporate context (e.g. Schurman, 2004; den Hond and de Bakker, 2007; Soule, 2009) there is a lack of insight into how activist groups sequentially apply their tactics to evoke institutional change within an industry.

There are four reasons why we explore the potential of an industry-level approach to studying conflicts between activist groups and firms. First, activist groups often operate in networks (Diani and McAdam, 2003). To understand the full potential of movements, studying the strategic interplay within these networks is useful.

Activist groups, for instance, may coordinate protest campaigns across geographically distant areas, e.g. in the timing of protest events and in the framing of issues, as is discussed in the literature on transnational activist networks (Bandy and Smith, 2005; Tarrow, 2005). Because of such coordination the density of the activist group’s network

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increases, which in turn is likely to enhance the efficacy of their pressure (Rowley, 1997). Further, by collaborating activist groups may claim to act on behalf of a significantly greater constituency than when working alone, thus adding to the legitimacy of their claim (DeNardo, 1985). Finally, by pooling their strategic orientations and related expertise in particular protest tactics, their campaigns may gain clout as – metaphorically speaking – their struggle is fought with different weapons.

Second, activist groups are often more interested in changing the conditions within an industry than in bringing about change in particular firms (Lounsbury et al., 2003; Zald et al., 2005). Both collaboration and confrontation with firms can be instrumental in getting closer to this overall ambition for institutional change. So far, there has been only limited empirical evidence to support the claim that activist groups aim for any industry-level change when they challenge or work with firms, as scholarly attention has privileged dyadic relationships between individual activist groups and individual firms (Hartman and Stafford, 1997; Livesey, 1999).

Third, activist groups' tactical choices in challenging an industry are likely to change over time; the sequential patterning of tactics for targeting firms over time therefore needs further attention. The social movement literature can be helpful, as the patterning of activist tactics has often been studied (e.g. McAdam, 1983; Polletta and Jasper, 2001). However, many of such analyses were conducted in a public policy context, whereas activist group pressure against firms has developed into an international, perhaps even global, phenomenon (Smith, 2004; Tarrow, 2005) addressing topics and issues that are beyond the immediate influence of national governments.

Finally, studies of activist tactics often highlight the adoption of new strategies and tactics. Fewer analyses have been devoted to their sequential adoption over time and to their adoption at the movement level of analysis (Minkoff, 1997; King and Cornwall,

2005). Studying activism at the industry level over time therefore also provides an opportunity to uncover ways activists learn from all earlier experiences had at that level.

Drawing on social movement and inter-organizational conflict theories, we seek to understand the patterning of activist groups' tactical choices over time in evoking

industry change. Using a wide variety of data, we study how activist groups applied different tactics in eight conflict situations (cases) in different Asian countries, each of which involving one of three leading companies in the global sports and apparel industry: Nike, adidas[1], and Reebok. Activist pressure built up across the eight cases, suggesting how the accumulation of activism led to an increase of pressure to change policies and activities on labour issues in the industry's international supply chains. For each case we extracted a chronology of events and identified:

- whether the activist group mainly aimed to delegitimize existing practices, or to help the firm find improvements;
- what tactics were employed; and
- what the preceding and following moves of the firm were.

Then, we analysed the cases both separately and in conjunction, at the industry level, to conclude that the latter approach provides a richer and more insightful explanation of activist groups' attempts at instigating industry change.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Conflict between activist groups and firms

Because in the literature little attention has been given to inter-organizational conflict[2], we build on the more general organizational conflict literature (e.g. Lewicki et al., 1992; Wall and Callister, 1995). Wall and Callister (1995, p. 517) see conflict as “a process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party”. Similarly, in this study, we define conflict as a situation in which the activist group and the firm have different evaluations of the nature and consequences of the firm’s operations.

For example, a firm might offshore production to low-wage countries in order to reduce costs. Further cost reductions might result in poor labour conditions, including – but not limited to – below subsistence payments, hazardous working conditions, denial of the right to unionize, sexual harassment of female workers, or the use of child labour. Local workers and, through their embeddedness in transnational activist networks (Keck and Sikkink, 1998), activist groups in European and North-American markets, could well consider such consequences unacceptable. If this is the case, a conflict is born. On the one side of the conflict are local workers and their activist allies and on the other side is the firm (brand or retailer) and its supply network. Often, a local conflict is transferred to the transnational level in a move of scale shift (Tarrow, 2005; Soule, 2009), thus creating a “corporate boomerang” (Armbruster-Sandoval, 2004). In this move, the conflict becomes “strategic” (Pondy, 1969) as the activist group’s ambition of social change is likely to have profound and long-lasting consequences for the organizational structures within the challenged firm and its supply network.

Although collaboration often has been proposed as the preferred solution to inter-organizational conflict, sometimes confrontation is deliberately chosen (Hardy and Phillips, 1998); confrontation and collaboration are two strategies that parties in a conflict may both draw upon in playing out their conflict.

2.2 An industry-level approach

How can activist groups instigate change within an industry if recourse to law or government regulation is unavailable as a lever for change? We distinguish firm-level

and industry-level approaches to analyse how activist groups try to do so, and propose that the latter provides a richer understanding.

In the firm-level approach, activist groups are seen as articulating a particular conflict by challenging target firms individually, in order to convert them to their preferred position. Although some mimetic diffusion of their preferred conflict solution throughout the industry may occur, this is not the central focus of analysis. Institutional change is explained as aggregate outcome of a series of fairly isolated, unconnected dyadic conflicts. Several studies on the outcomes of activism are based on such a conceptualization of the conflict between activist groups and firms (e.g. Eesley and Lenox, 2006; Zadek, 2004). However, these studies often ignore the possible interaction between separate individual, dyadic conflicts (den Hond and de Bakker, 2007).

In the industry-level approach, activist groups are seen as targeting firms in the light of their broader ambition to affect the entire industry. By framing and articulating the conflict as a broader problem than one concerning a particular firm, activist groups not only hope to make their claim more legitimate, but also to broaden the playing field. This allows them more degrees of freedom in deciding how to proceed with their campaigns, e.g. in finding allies, pooling resources and expertise, and coordinating protest events in distant areas, as argued also in research on transnational activism (see Bandy and Smith, 2005). The conflict is seen as more extended in its scope, both over time and geographically. How one firm is challenged is related to how other firms have been challenged before, to the challenged firms' responses, e.g. in their ability to neutralize a challenge, and also to the activist groups' expectations of the effect of earlier conflicts on other members of the industry. The focus of the industry-level analysis is on the coordination of activist groups' actions at a broader level and over time.

To investigate our suggestion, we not only need to show that the industry-level approach results in a plausible explanation of activist group campaigns, but also that the alternative, i.e. that the historical pattern can be understood as the accumulation of a series of unconnected conflicts, is less plausible. To that end we analyse the sequential patterning of different activist groups' tactics over time in eight conflict situations. To do so, we first need to develop a dynamic conceptualization of the conflict between activist groups and firms.

2.3 Conflict dynamics

Building on della Porta and Diani (1999), den Hond and de Bakker (2007) proposed a classification of anti-corporate tactics as applied by activist groups. Because of the firm's profit motive, the potential efficacy of activist tactics can be understood to depend on their consequences to the firm's bottom line, either directly at the material level (e.g. affecting a firm's cost or revenue), or indirectly at the symbolic level (e.g. affecting a firm's reputation). The impact of tactics may be beneficial to the firm, providing a positive incentive for change, or it may harm the firm, damage its interests, and thus provide a negative incentive. Further, activist tactics can be distinguished by the extent to which their efficacy does or does not depend on the participation of a large number of people (respectively mass participation tactics and elite participation tactics). These dimensions describe different types of tactics; we consider this classification as particularly apt for our analysis.

Firms often respond to activist group tactics[3]. Several categorizations of firm responses have been proposed (Thomas, 1992; Oliver, 1991). For analytical purposes, we group firm responses into two clusters: positive and negative. Firms choosing positive responses (e.g. collaboration, accommodation, acquiescence, compromise) signal that they are open to engage with the activist groups' demands. Firms choosing negative responses (e.g. avoidance, competition, defiance, manipulation) seek to avert them.

Conflict is a sequence of action-response episodes (Wall and Callister, 1995): short periods of time in which a firm responds to an activist group tactic. Usually, several episodes can be distinguished in a conflict (Pondy, 1992; Thomas, 1992). Whether additional episodes are created, that is, how a conflict evolves over time, depends on decisions by both parties in the conflict. The conflict is resolved, either directly by concession or with some delay due to compromising; it is continued, because the firm's response is considered inadequate by the activist group or because the firm decides not to give into the claims; or it is abandoned, as the activist group decides no longer to pursue its challenge to the firm. By analysing different conflict episodes at the industry

The global sports apparel industry level, we can trace the build-up of efforts by activist groups to change a prevailing standards and practices. In the type of conflict we analyse, activist groups typically start off using elite participation tactics aimed at having a symbolic impact (den Hond and de Bakker, 2007); they inform the firm that a

certain violation of labour rights has taken place and require remedial action to be taken. This gives the challenged firm the option to work with the activist group, and is cost-effective and risk-free to the activist group. However, upon repeated negative responses, activist groups will start using tactics that require mass participation for their efficacy (e.g. demonstrations), or that aim to make a material impact (e.g. boycotts). Such tactics are more resource intensive and risky. For example, it can be difficult for activist groups to mobilize large numbers of people to join protest events, and making a material impact on the firm, such as through a boycott, may result in a part of the activist group's constituency deciding to withdraw its support. The lack of progress in conflict settlement may however provide a justification to use alternative tactics.

Continuation of conflict may result in escalation in various ways. The scope of the conflict may be broadened, either in terms of the locus of conflict, or in terms of the number of different actors participating in the conflict. Alternatively, the pacing of the conflict may increase, as actions and responses follow one upon another at a quicker rhythm (Tarrow, 1994). Finally, the means by which the actors involved seek to end the conflict change, usually by progressively choosing more resource intensive and risky tactics: including mass participation tactics with symbolic impact (such as demonstrations), mass participation tactics with material impact (such as boycotts), and eventually elite participation tactics with material impact (such as sabotage) (den Hond and de Bakker, 2007). As the application of this latter set of tactics may jeopardize public support for the activists' cause, we expect that such tactics are only rarely found. Conflict endures until one of the actors involved "surrenders" or leaves the conflict[4], or until a settlement is agreed upon that is acceptable to both actors. These dynamics can be summarized as follows:

- Early in the conflict, activist groups select elite participation tactics with a symbolic impact.
- The conflict is ended upon the challenged firm's positive response.
- The conflict continues and eventually escalates upon the challenged firm's negative response.
- Upon escalation, activist groups expand their choice of tactics by selecting, first, mass participation tactics with symbolic impact, then, mass participation tactics with material impact, and eventually, elite participation tactics with material impact.

We analyse conflict as episodes of action and response in cases that are drawn from the widely publicized conflict between the anti-sweatshop movement and firms in the global sports apparel industry over worker rights and other labour issues. If the firm-level approach were the proper lens to understand the conflict, we would observe highly similar patterns of action and response in each case. Escalation would occur in terms of changing tactics within each separate case; each case would go through the same cycle of protest and be confronted with the same sequence of tactics. The alternative of analysing the conflict by the industry-level approach would suggest that escalation of the conflict would occur both within and across cases, and moreover that the developments in different cases are linked in the sense that understanding what happens in one conflict situation depends on understanding what happens in other cases.

3 DATA AND METHOD

We selected the global sports apparel industry because of its fairly high level of concentration, keeping the research project manageable in terms of the number of firms that could be challenged. Data collection took place in 2004; it covers the period between 1988 and 2002.

Our choice to make use of secondary data – articles, case studies and other reports – is motivated by the large number of publications readily available. However, our approach is not to be confused with a research literature review as our objective was to comprehensively outline the history of the interaction between activist groups and the targeted firms, rather than to compare and contrast the results of individual studies.

Among the 47 publications we used are 19 academic journal articles, six research reports, nine teaching cases, and 13 books and book chapters. We found them through keyword searches in bibliographic databases as well as the internet. Many treatises of activist challenges to firms in the global sports apparel industry were designed as dyadic case studies. Inclusion in this study was decided on the basis of the level of detail in describing the conflict. We deliberately included studies of various epistemological orientations, in order to balance any possible biases that might have intruded in individual studies because of their specific objectives and approaches.

We analysed our data by closely reading all the materials we gathered, aimed at identifying events: a firm or an activist group doing something in a particular place, at a particular time. We collected these events in a spreadsheet and sorted them by date, leading to an initial data matrix. We combined similar events that were retrieved from different sources into a single record, resulting in a database of about 1,100 events. Table I provides a short timeline of the conflicts. Our material suggested that several conflict situations could be identified in different geographical regions; various conflict situations were discussed in only one or two publications. We decided not to include these in our analysis, as we wanted to triangulate the data underlying the individual case descriptions and thereby correct for potential errors and omissions. We chose to further analyse the eight conflict situations that were most widely covered. All these conflicts were located in Asia, an area where a large share of the World's production of sports apparel is being produced. Three firms – Nike, Reebok, and adidas – were involved in these eight conflict situations[5].

4 RESULTS

Activist groups started their campaigning in the sports apparel industry by challenging Nike, the industry leader. As of 1988, the Asian American Free Labor Institute, in the person of Jeff Ballinger, executed extensive field research in Indonesia, and found many labour rights violations. Other groups conducted similar research.

They found that companies in Nike's supply network were among the worst offenders (Bullert, 2000), and tried to get media attention for their results. Hence, research and media attention – examples of elite participation tactics aimed at having a symbolic impact – were the tactics initially used.

Nike's response was negative in claiming that the firm could not control the production processes of its many suppliers and that low wages were part of the firm's growth strategy. Continuing media attention led to the firm adopting a code of conduct

Table 1 Short timeline of events and their context

| Year | Event |
|--------------|---|
| 1970s, 1980s | Western companies discover the advantages of outsourcing production to developing countries |
| 1988-1992 | Jeff Ballinger conducts extensive field research on labour conditions at Indonesian suppliers to Western sports apparel brands |
| 1991 | Levi Strauss and Co. is the first corporation in the apparel and footwear industry to establish comprehensive global sourcing and operating guidelines, after it uncovered violations of workers' human rights in their Chinese contractors in the late 1980s |
| 1992 | Articles begin to appear in newspapers and magazines (notably Ballinger's article in Harper's magazine) The Olympic Games provide the occasion for various instances of activism Nike is the second corporation in the apparel and footwear industry to adopt a code of conduct |

| | |
|------|--|
| 1996 | Ballinger (Press for Change) and Medea Benjamin (Global Exchange) join forces Under the tutelage of the Clinton administration, the Apparel Industry Partnership (AIP) is established. Nike is among the founding members |
| 1997 | Adidas establishes “Standards of Engagement” (updated in 2001), after the company, as well as Nike and Reebok, has been criticized for the use of child labour in the production of soccer balls in Pakistan |
| 1998 | Nike publicly accepts responsibility for many of the issues facing its suppliers |
| 1999 | AIP is transformed into the Fair Labor Association Adidas, as well as Nike and Pentland, face the issue of substandard occupational health and safety situations in Vietnamese suppliers World Trade Organization (WTO) meetings in Seattle |
| 2000 | Worker Rights Consortium is founded |
| 2001 | Adidas starts publishing an annual Social and Environmental Report |
| 2004 | Clean clothes campaign (CCC), Oxfam, and Global Union start the Fair Play campaign in the six months prior to the Olympic Games. The focus is on companies that until then had escaped scrutiny, such as Asics, Fila, Kappa, Lotto, Mizuno, Puma, and Umbro Ending of Multi Fiber Agreement |
| 2005 | Nike, Reebok, and Puma disclose the names and addresses of several of their suppliers |
| 2006 | Oxfam publishes a report on the labour rights at Asian suppliers of Reebok, Adidas, Nike, and several other well-known brands |

in 1992. The code was received by activist groups as impression management. For example, it was not communicated to workers in their own languages. In the early 1990s, a real media campaign slowly emerged, including the inversion of Nike advertisements (“culture jamming”) and the opposition of Indonesian workers’ earnings and those of Michael Jordan by promoting Nike. Although Nike revised its code and hired external parties to certify that its contractors were really following all the local labour laws (e.g. Wokutch, 2001), it also negated allegations and responsibilities. This pattern of interaction – elite participation tactics aimed at having a symbolic impact and negative responses – remained unchanged until the mid-1990s.

After 1995, the campaign became more organized and better resourced, notably by the entry of Global Exchange into the conflict. This helped the activist groups to escalate the conflict (Bullert, 2000): it was picked up in the mass media, thus creating something of a hype, and the first demonstrations and boycotts (examples of mass participation tactics aimed at having, respectively, symbolic and material impacts) were being organized (Hendry, 2000). Moreover, the campaign was also being organized in Europe and Australia. When Nike entered Vietnam in 1995, the conflict’s geographical scope was expanded beyond Indonesia, by activists’ immediate scrutiny of Nike’s Vietnamese supply chain. The data suggest that both the activist groups and Nike considered the two loci of confrontation to be part of the same conflict. For instance, when in 1997 Nike invited a well-reputed consultant to independently investigate its factories and evaluate its code of conduct for relations with third-world producers, he was invited to do so in Indonesia, Vietnam, and China (e.g. Goldman and Papson, 1998; Santoro, 2003).

Despite its adherence, in 1996, to the Clinton administration’s initiative of the Apparel Industry Partnership, as one of the first companies to do so, Nike’s approach really did not change until 1998, following the results of an internal study concluding that a major explanation for the continuation of the conflict was the company’s underlying business model, which provided incentives with consequences contrary to the objectives and principles of its code of conduct (Bullert, 2000). Although Nike became more constructive in how it addressed the issues, e.g. by increasingly engaging in collaboration with various NGOs and competitors Reebok and adidas (Arnold and Hartman, 2003), there is also a continuing scrutiny, and critique, of the labour

conditions of its suppliers (e.g. Conner and Dent, 2006). In the early 2000s, the campaign's focus shifted towards installing the mechanisms that help improve the situation of workers, e.g. by demanding disclosure of the names of the firm's suppliers.

In October 1990, The New York Times published one of the first reports on Pakistani boys stitching soccer balls. Adidas was mentioned, but the article did not attract much attention. This changed after the 1994 World Cup organized in the USA. Investigations in Pakistan and media coverage of labour conditions associated adidas, as well as Nike, Reebok, and other brands, with violations of child labour standards in the production of soccer balls. Years 1995 and 1996 saw additional research, media campaigning, and demonstrations (elite and mass participation tactics with symbolic impact), as well as the organization of boycotts (mass participation tactics with material impact) (Khan et al., 2007; Schrage, 2004). The case of adidas in China is an extension of the Pakistan case, as the firm transferred some production to China. It was accused that forced labour by prisoners was in the production. In 1996, adidas entered Vietnam for the production of shoes. In 1999, the spotlight turned on the company (Winstanley et al., 2002). Multiple tactics were being used simultaneously, as in the Pakistan case.

Adidas' responses in the Pakistan and Vietnam cases differ significantly from Nike's responses: it consistently framed the problem as an industry-wide problem. Nike only did this occasionally. Whereas Nike's initial response was a combination of denial of facts and denial of responsibility, adidas' response was ambiguous in expressing both concern and denial of its ability to change the situation. However, after Nike's "surrender" in June 1998, adidas became significantly more constructive in Pakistan. Other protests aimed at adidas however were less fruitful. In the two conflicts in China reference was made to the company's code of conduct, but the activist groups dropped both conflicts. In Vietnam, a solution was being crafted in December 1999, when adidas started working with the "Vietnam Footwear Industry Business Links Initiative".

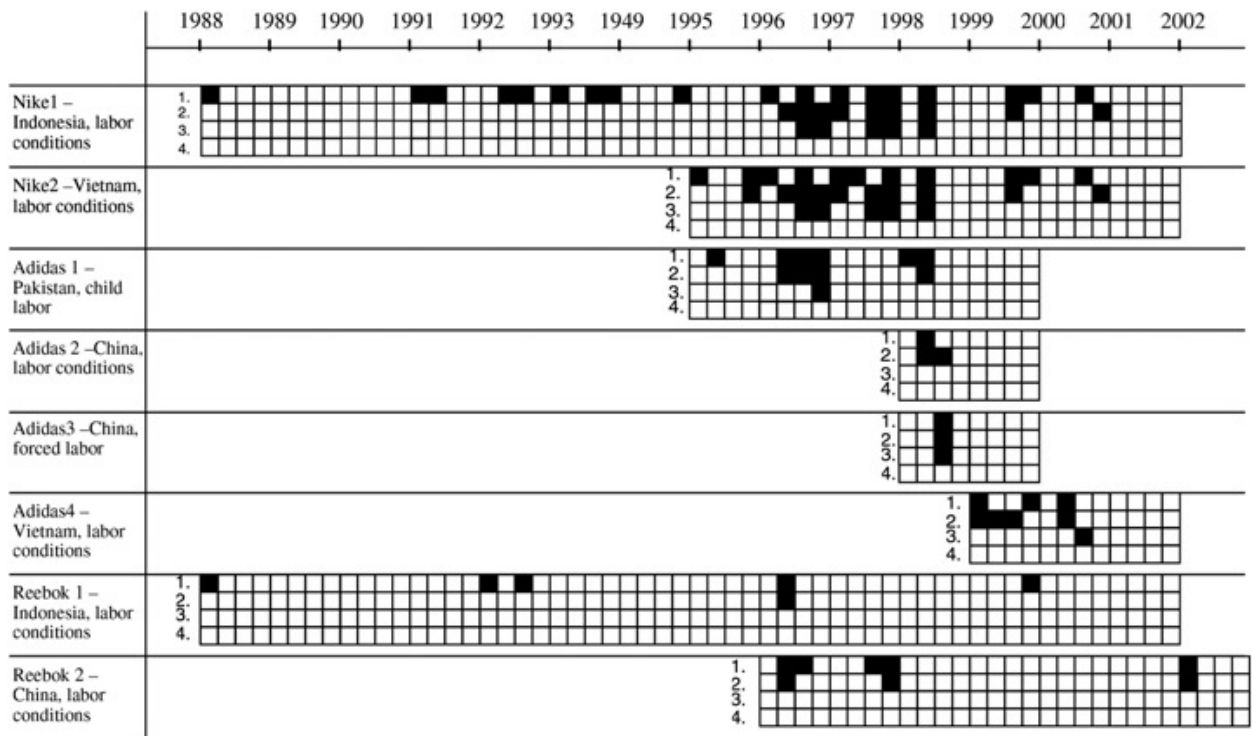
Reebok took several initiatives to show its commitment to human rights as early as 1988, e.g. by establishing a human rights department, collaborating with Amnesty International, granting an annual "Human Rights Award" to young activists who had made significant contributions to human rights causes through nonviolent means[6], and adopting a code of conduct in 1992 (Gupta and Prashanth, 2002). However, although Reebok received less criticism than Nike in the early 1990s, such commitments did not make the company immune to activism. In 1992 activist groups challenged Reebok for the labour conditions among its Indonesian suppliers. Positive

responses and further accusations provided the scenario for the Indonesian conflict. Escalation took place in 1996, when several activist groups disturbed Reebok's annual "Human Rights Award" ceremony. In addition to using different tactics, they broadened the geographical scope of the accusations to also include China, although the dynamics of the Chinese conflict were somewhat different. Initially, Reebok's responses were more negative in China than in Indonesia; it took until 1999 before Reebok started to develop the sort of collaborations with activist groups and other Chinese actors that eventually ended the conflict.

Although our analysis of the events stops at the end of 2002 – a consequence of our data collection in 2004 – further developments have been observed, including the gradual rise of disagreement about strategic choices among the network of activist groups, a developing focus in investigations to include the supply chain conditions of the majority of players in the industry (Merk, 2005; Conner and Dent, 2006), and also to include other suppliers in other countries, such as Sri Lanka and Thailand (Conner and Dent, 2006). Further, on 31 December 2004, the Multi-Fiber Agreement expired, which had regulated the trade in garments through export quota for a period of some 40 years; this expiration gave rise to concerns about brands having more opportunities to shift production across countries and thereby escape scrutiny. In 2005, Nike and Reebok disclosed the names and addresses on many of their suppliers, providing some more transparency in their supply chains.

5 DISCUSSION

Figure 1 summarizes our findings. If our conceptualization of the dynamics of the conflict between activist groups and firms is correct, then the sequence of tactics is a suitable indicator of the level at which the conflict is to be understood. If the conflict is firm and location specific, e.g. if it is about labour conditions in Nike's Indonesian



Notes: 1. Elite participation tactics with symbolic impact – ES; 2. mass participation tactics with symbolic impact – MS; 3. mass participation tactics with material impact – MM; 4. elite participation tactics with material impact – EM

Figure 1 Overview of tactics applied in eight different conflicts

supply chain only, then the escalation of conflict is to be observed at this level. If on the other hand, the conflict is played out at the industry level, then escalation must be observed across firms and geographical locations. As Figure 1 shows, the latter appears to be the case.

Our findings do not match our conceptualization when considered at the firmlevel of analysis. For example, in several instances (conflicts 4, 5, 6, and 8, involving adidas and Reebok) activist groups initiated conflict by applying not only elite participation

tactics aimed at symbolic impact, but also mass participation tactics aimed at symbolic influence, and in one case (conflict 5, involving adidas) even mass participation tactics aimed at material impact. Further, as conflict 8 (involving Reebok) most clearly shows, positive responses by a firm may lead to less confrontational, if not collaborative, episodes in the conflict but do not necessarily put an end to the conflict. When, by 1996, several activist groups believed that Reebok had not made sufficient progress in improving labour conditions among its Indonesian suppliers (conflict 7), escalation occurred by applying mass participation tactics with symbolic impact. Perhaps its prior positive responses “protected” this firm from being exposed to activism (or perhaps the activist groups lacked the resources required to make the case), but still the conflict escalated. Although Reebok’s early responses might be interpreted as a spill-over effect from the challenges Nike faced, the timing of escalation in both cases is strikingly similar, and therefore suggests some coordination between the two cases.

Activist groups apparently chose to first challenge Nike, the industry leader, as they considered it impossible to challenge all firms simultaneously. Hoping for diffusion of their message throughout the industry initially seemed to be an effective strategy, as Global Exchange makes clear:

By targeting the industry leader, we hoped to make changes throughout the whole industry. This strategy has proven effective. Reebok, for example, has been making improvements in its overseas factories even though it has not been the target of a major campaign.

(Global Exchange, 2006).

However, Reebok was challenged – albeit not to the same degree as Nike – during the early 1990s. In the mid-1990s, the campaign changed to simultaneously challenging multiple brands in multiple locations. This was partly associated to Nike and Adidas shifting production to other countries and partly to the general public in Western markets gaining interest in labour issues after activist groups had been pushing them for some time. Figure 1 also shows how after 1995 the conflict escalated along three dimensions:

- 1) an increased use of tactics (both in number and type of tactics);
- 2) the shaping of new conflicts aimed at the same actor but at a different geographical location; and
- 3) the shaping of new conflicts aimed at other actors within the industry.

Hence, would this latter conceptualization provide a better fit when the conflict is analysed at the industry-level of analyses? We re-examine our data, by looking at the dynamics of conflict as aggregated over the set of eight cases, rather than at the cases individually. For instance, an interesting pattern can be identified in Figure 1, concerning the use of tactics by activist groups. It should be noted that between 1988 and 1995, activist groups only deployed elite participation tactics aimed at having a symbolic impact to change the behaviour of these firms. Also striking is the fact that during this period only two conflicts arose (conflicts 1 and 7). Both Nike and Reebok were confronted with criticism on labour conditions in their Indonesian facilities, but whereas the interaction with Nike was confrontational, with Reebok it was more collaborative. We will discuss the different periods distinguished in Figure 1 in more detail to underline the relevance of taking an industry-level approach to understand the conflict.

First, as shown in Figure 1, from 1995 onwards, activist groups have deployed more and more diverse tactics, sometimes in combination, to influence firms in the global sports apparel industry. Activist groups are exerting pressure on firms more frequently after 1995, no longer calling upon elite participation tactics with a symbolic impact only, but increasingly deploying mass participation tactics with a symbolic and even material impact to evoke change in corporate behaviour. Several years of informing the general public in Western markets about labour issues had made the public sufficiently aware and concerned that activist groups could build on it in their campaigns. In a sense, the opportunity for successfully deploying tactics that require mass participation for their success was created by the steady dissemination of information.

Second, our results indicate that new conflicts developed that were aimed at the same actor but at a different geographical location. An example is the mutual influence between conflicts 1 and 2. Initially, Nike was only challenged in relation to labour conditions in the production facilities of the firm's Indonesian suppliers. Yet, in 1995, the same activist group challenged Nike concerning labour conditions in factories of its Vietnamese suppliers. The conflict issue "labour conditions" apparently spread from Indonesia to Vietnam. A similar escalation can be seen in the Reebok cases (conflicts 7 and 8). After a period of more than eight years in which activist groups only challenged Reebok regarding labour conditions in its Indonesian facilities, the company was also confronted with criticism on its Chinese subsidiaries. Geographical conflict escalation

occurred in relation to brands seeking supplies from different locations, a common practice in this industry.

Third, conflict escalation can also be observed when additional corporate actors are drawn into the conflict, thus broadening the conflict to the industry level. In the conflict literature it is acknowledged that when two parties become engaged in a conflict, fairly simple conflicts can become more and more complicated and that one initial conflict can give rise to the development of a series of conflicts (Wall and Callister, 1995). From Figure 1 it appears that between 1995 and 1999 such an extension of conflicts also took place. New conflict situations emerged, aimed at other actors, such as in conflicts 3-5 in which adidas is confronted with criticism concerning child labour in its Pakistan facilities and the dreadful labour conditions in its Chinese factories.

Fourth, the escalation not only shows from a growing range of tactics being used by activist groups, and a broadening of the geographic and industry focus, but also from a change in the demands activist groups express through their actions. Initially, their demands focused on improvements of labour conditions, including wages and working hours. Later, occupational health and safety were added as important elements of labour conditions; by the early 2000s, activist groups increasingly reframed their demands in terms of local workers' rights to negotiate fair labour conditions for themselves through unionization. Additionally, transparency in the organization of supply chains was increasingly demanded.

By 1999 three conflicts (3-5) seemed to be ended, thereby diminishing the intensity of the industry-level conflict. After 1999, the variety of tactics activist groups deployed decreased. As Figure 1 shows, between 1999 and 2002 only elite participation and mass participation tactics aimed at having a symbolic influence were applied. One explanation might be that around that time, a debate within the activist communities surfaced around the question of how to appreciate the moves Nike had made in 1998 (Bullert, 2000). To some (e.g. Global Exchange) Nike's moves were promising, to others (e.g. Press for Change), they were not substantial enough. The industry-level approach leads us to distinguish three stages in the conflict. The overture of the conflict is in the period 1988-1995; 1995-1999 is a period of escalation; and 1999-2002 is characterized by some settlement of the conflict as well as emerging controversy among the activist groups.

Presenting the conflicts in one figure allowed us to investigate the pattern across these separate conflicts. The pattern looks like a parabola: in the first stage of the conflict, activist groups deployed only a limited set of tactics that were not resource-intensive (elite participation tactics with a symbolic impact). In the second stage, a shift occurred towards activist groups using more resource intensive tactics such as mass participation tactics with a symbolic and material impact. Several new conflicts arose and more activist groups became engaged in the industry-level debate. During this stage the conflict escalated. Finally, in the third stage, the conflict attenuated, as there was a decrease in the deployment of different tactics and in the number of conflicts in the third stage of the industry-level conflict, leading to the use of elite and mass participation tactics with a symbolic impact only. This is related to concessions made by the challenged firms, as well as increased disagreement over the framing of the conflict among activist groups.

After 2002 the conflict seems to have intensified again. In terms of our presentation of conflict dynamics (listed earlier), there is differentiation in how various activist groups appreciate the firms' responses around the turn of the century; some activist groups stepped back from the campaign whereas others gained a more prominent role and new groups entered stage, the focus of the campaign shifted to "allow workers to organise trade unions and bargain collectively for better wages and conditions" (Conner and Dent, 2006, p. 2), and other companies that until then had remained relatively out of the spotlight were being targeted (Conner and Dent, 2006). It could be argued that a new "protest cycle" (Tarrow, 1994) had started, which on the one hand built on the previous and on the other hand was characterized by a new coalition of activist groups posing different claims on an expanded set of target firms (Table I).

6 IMPLICATIONS

Our findings have several implications. Analysing the conflict from the industry level of analysis provides a better explanation for our findings than analysing it at the firm level of analysis. Looking beyond single events aimed at individual firms provides a richer and more comprehensive understanding of activist groups' tactical choices.

First, our analysis indicates that already in the first stages of conflict 2, activist groups turn to using a combination of elite participation and mass participation tactics with a symbolic impact. Right from the start of the conflict, Nike was confronted with mass participation tactics such as a boycott, demonstrations, and petitions. Taking a firm-level approach makes it hard to understand these results, as conflicts then are analysed one at a time. Taking an industry-level view on these data allows us to understand how conflict 2 is linked to conflict 1. Within both conflicts the same activist groups operate and the focal issue is identical in both episodes. Conflict 2 therefore indeed is an extension of conflict 1 and should therefore not be analysed independently. If conflicts 1 and 2 are regarded as one continuing conflict, it appears that the activist groups initially only used elite participation tactics with a symbolic impact. Following these conflicts, in 1995 activist groups applied a combination of elite participation and mass participation tactics with a symbolic impact to influence Nike's behaviour; later on a combination of elite participation tactics with a symbolic impact and mass participation tactics with a symbolic and material impact was applied. This again supports our idea to view conflicts at an industry level.

Second, our analysis also suggests that the targeting of Nike in 1988 influenced Reebok's behaviour. The results show that, without any direct activist group pressure, Reebok took several measures to improve labour conditions in its Indonesian factories. This shows that the tactics with which activist groups tried to establish a change in Nike's behaviour, unintended and indirectly also influenced Reebok's behaviour. Activist groups' tactics aimed at a specific firm in some instances hence can also trigger unintended effects on other firms' behaviour in the same industry. If, for instance, conflict 7 is analysed from a firm-level approach, it would be hard to understand why Reebok took measures to demonstrate its dedication to human rights issues already in 1988. An industry-level approach, however, shows that there can be mutual influences between different conflicts; only an industry-level approach allows us to observe such patterns between different episodes.

Finally, such an approach also provides a possible explanation for understanding why activist groups already early in conflict 5 deployed a combination of elite participation tactics with a symbolic impact and mass participation tactics with a symbolic and a material impact to influence adidas' behaviour regarding Chinese prisoners. Conflicts 4 and 5 in principle are similar situations as conflicts 1 and 2 for Nike as in both cases the episodes could best be seen as an ongoing conflict. Although in conflicts 4 and 5 different issues were at stake, both conflict episodes were centred on labour conditions in Chinese factories and prisons. Experiences in conflict 4 seem to have influenced the tactical choices of activists in conflict 5.

7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

From our discussion, we conclude that an industry-level approach to understand anti-corporate activism can generate additional insights. Our study of a broad range of conflicts and applied tactics within one industry over a longer period of time sheds light on the development of conflict within an industry. From Figure 1 it appeared that a pattern could be discerned in this industry-level conflict that fitted well with our conceptualization of conflict dynamics. Activist groups initially deployed elite participation tactics with a symbolic impact. When the conflict intensified, activist groups increasingly deployed more risky and resource intensive tactics. In addition, several new conflict episodes started and more activists entered the conflict. Finally, near the end of the industry-level conflict, activist groups seemed to deploy fewer tactics, while many conflicts were ended. Contrary to the results based on an analysis at the firm level, the industry-level analysis mainly supports the theoretically expected pattern. Additionally, the industry-level analysis allows us to focus on the dynamics and mutual influences between individual conflicts.

This research suggests that taking a broader approach is useful in gaining purchase of activist groups' application of tactics to influence firms. It is highly important for our insight in the interplay between activist groups and firms to see that activist groups not only target the behaviour of individual firms as such but also, and maybe even more so, strive for industry change. After all, it is at this level that activist groups want to establish a change in norms as to what is considered proper corporate conduct. This broader focus also necessitates a broader view on conflict since an industry-level approach recommends researchers to study all tactics that activist groups deploy within one specific industry, monitoring the role of different activist groups' tactics within these processes (see Whittier, 2004).

Although our analysis provides support to these ideas, several issues remain. First, it would be useful to delve deeper in each conflict episode and to determine which activist groups exactly are involved in what stage of the conflict; who are they, what do they want? This would provide a richer account of the change processes studied, although it will not be an easy task to accomplish as not all activities of activist groups are out in the open[7]. To fully appreciate the impact of industry-level conflicts, looking at the industry structure in greater detail would also be useful. In the global apparel industry,

for instance, subcontracting is important, competition is fierce and trade policies are highly influential and deserve further attention.

Closely linked, in the literature much attention has already been given to firm-level conflicts. Yet, a network perspective on corporate social responsibility (CSR)-activism and its implications for institutional change still is lacking. How do individual activist groups cooperate on these issues, if they do so at all? What makes these networks different from the ones studied elsewhere in social movement literature (Diani and McAdam, 2003)? How about co-ordination mechanisms in these increasingly transnational conflicts or tactical overlap across activist groups (Whittier, 2004)? Scaling up the analysis from the firm level to the industry level hence invites in social network research.

Furthermore, getting a better overview of the individual activist groups involved in these institutional change processes and their relationships also could contribute to a further refinement of the conceptualization of conflict we applied, e.g. by differentiating among activist groups in terms of their ideological position (Zald, 2000; den Hond and de Bakker, 2007). It might be suggested that to some extent ideological position is the outcome of the conflict. As Fransen (2010) reminds us, at the very onset of the conflict, neither activist groups nor brands could know how solutions might be found, nor what their repercussions might be. Hence, it might be argued that the process itself created a shift within the movement, with some groups starting to believe that brands might be able to solve the problem, and others less so. In terms of the distinction between movements relying on “insider” or “outsider” tactics (Andrews, 2001; Taylor and Van Dyke, 2004), some became more insider oriented, others remained more outsider oriented. This shift in the population of activist groups might provide an opportunity for studying its consequences on movement outcomes (cf. Minkoff, 1997).

Finally, the different national settings in which the conflicts played out might also have had an impact on the development of these conflicts. Local opportunity structures in China might have been less favourable for activist groups than those in, for instance, Indonesia. Conflicts that were based on China (conflicts 4, 5, and 8) were fairly limited compared to those in Indonesia or Vietnam, regardless of which firm was involved. Looking into the literature on political opportunity structures might be fruitful in this respect (cf. Caraway, 2006). It would also provide more insight on the events happening in the supply chains themselves, including the possibility of obstruction and retaliation by local management, and offer the opportunity to investigate to what extent

the local conflict in the supply chain and its articulation in Western markets are connected.

We conclude by emphasizing once again that an industry-level approach is appropriate when studying activist pressure for industry change, because it allows us to observe and understand the mutual influence and extension of conflicts across an industry, and thereby contributes to understanding transnational activism.

NOTES

- 1 Since a few years, the adidas group name and brand are written in lower case. In 2006, the three companies had a cumulative share of the world market of about 59 per cent (www.fashionunited.nl, accessed March 2006).
- 2 The relative lack of attention could result from a desire to focus on the more positive aspects of inter-organizational relations (Pondy, 1992). Stakeholder and issues management theories suggest that inter-organizational conflict is to be avoided because – normatively – firms must respect legitimate claims of their stakeholders, e.g. by engaging in stakeholder dialogues and issues management (Jones and Wicks, 1999).
- 3 Once the conflict has been started, firms may also take the initiative and try to pre-empt activist tactics.
- 4 In the situations we studied, “exit” is only an option to the challenger. An activist group may decide no longer to pursue its challenge, e.g. because it runs out of resources, sees alternative opportunities to more effectively realize its goals, or out of sheer frustration related to a lack of progress. The challenged, in this case the firm, may choose to ignore the challenge but cannot unilaterally decide to abandon the conflict.
- 5 For reasons of space, we only sketch important characteristics of the three firms and the conflicts they have become engaged in, highlighting the interplay between activists and firms. An elaborate overview of the cases we analysed and the sources we used can be obtained from the authors.
- 6 www.reebok.com/Static/global/initiatives/rights/awards/index.html (accessed 20 May 2010).
- 7 One complication might be in the use of “gun-behind-the-door” tactics by activist groups – these tactics will not often be visible but might still be highly effective in influencing firms, often through some threat. Research on radical forms of activism might provide useful methodological suggestions to craft such studies. Thanks to Michelle Micheletti for bringing this point to our attention.

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